

# DRAGONS and Dragon Lore



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# **DRAGONS AND DRAGON LORE**

**BY ERNEST INGERSOLL**

With an Introduction by

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President of the American Museum of Natural History

"There's no such thing in nature, and you'll draw  
A faultless monster which the world ne'er saw."

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## Chapter 10

### THE DRAGON'S PRECIOUS PEARL

A Most curious, interesting, and at the same time obscure feature of this whole baffling subject is that of the so-called Pearl which accompanies the dragon in pictures and legends from the earliest times, and is common to the religious traditions of the whole East--India, China and Japan. Necklaces of pearls are a regular part of the regalia of naga-queens in their submarine palaces; and we read often in the old Vedic books of a magical 'jewel of good luck,' which was in custody of the naga-maidens but was lost by them through terror of their monstrous enemy, the bird garuda.

There are traces of it in early Taoism, but it is best preserved in Buddhism as the jewel in the lotus, the mani of the mystic, ecstatic, formula Om mani padme hum--the "Jewel that grants all desires," the 'divine pearl' of the Buddhists throughout the Orient.

Koreans commonly believe that the yellow (chief) dragon carries on his forehead (as also in Japan) a pear-shaped pearl having supernatural properties and healing power. In China alone, however, is this mystical accessory of the dragon made a significant part of pictures and decorative designs. Some say that originally every proper dragon carried a pearl under his chin; others that it was a special mark of imperial rank.

A sixth-century writer asserts that such pearls are "spit out of dragons like snake-pearls out of snakes," and have enormous value.

This extraordinary gem is represented as a spherical object, or 'ball,' half as big, or quite as large, as the head of the dragon with which it is associated, for it is never depicted quite by itself. The gem is white or bluish with a reddish or golden halo, and usually has an antler-shaped 'flame' rising from its surface.

Almost invariably there hangs downward from the centre of the sphere a dark-colored, comma-like appendage, frequently branched, wavering below the periphery. A biologist might easily at first glance conclude that the whole affair represented the entry of a spermatozoon into an ovum; and the Chinese commonly interpret the ball with its comma-mark as a symbol of yang and yin, male and female elements, combined in the earth--which seems pretty close to the biologist's view. Such is the Dragon-Pearl.

In purely decorative work, where the figure of a dragon is writhing in clouds or adapting its lithe body under an artist's hand to the shape or purpose of a piece of porcelain, a bronze article, or a silken garment, the pearl may be drawn close to the dragon, or wherever convenient. When, however, it is desirable to express the significance of this sacred adjunct of dragon hood, it is treated with strict attention to reverence and tradition.

Then are pictured celestial dragons ascending and descending through the upper air, tearing a path, perhaps, through swirling mists and shadows, "in pursuit of effulgent jewels or orbs that appear to be whirling in space, and that were supposed to be of magic efficiency, granting every wish."

A passion for gems is a well-known characteristic of these beings, and that it has 'always' been so is shown by a fable recorded by Joly. T'an T'ai Mieh Ming, a disciple of Confucius, was attacked, at the instigation of the god of the Yellow River, by two

dragons seeking to rob him of a valuable gem; but T'an T'ai slew the dragons and then, to show his contempt for worldly goods, threw the treasure into the river. Twice it leaped back into his boat, but at last he broke it in pieces and scattered the fragments.

Can these be the two dragons so often depicted facing one another in the air, and apparently rushing, as if in eager play, toward a pearl floating like an iridescent bubble between them? Nothing in the decorative art of China has occasioned more guessing and controversy than this.

An eighteenth century vase described by Chait is "decorated with nine dragons (a mystic number) whirling through scrolled clouds enveloping parts of their serpentine bodies in pursuit of jewels of omnipotence, which appear in the midst of clouds as revolving disks emitting branched rays of effulgence." Ball points out that in books issued under imperial auspices "two dragons encircle the title, striving... for a pearl."

Japanese designers like to form the handles of bells, whether big temple-bells or tiny ones, of two dragons affronts, with the tama between them. One Japanese carving represents a snake-like dragon coiled tightly around a ball, marked with spiral lines, illustrating devotion to the tama.

"A great ball of gilded glass," writes Visser, "is said to hang from the centre of the roof of the great hall of the Buddhist temple Fa(h)-yu-sze, or Temple of the Reign of Law, while eight dragons, curved around the 'hanging pillars,' eagerly stretch their claws towards the 'pearl of perfection.'... Dragons trying to seize a fiery 'pearl,' which is hanging in a gate, are represented twice in the same temple... We may be sure that the Chinese Buddhists, identifying the Dragon with the Naga, also identified the ball with their cintamani or 'precious pearl which grants all desires.'"

In these and many similar examples we, as outsiders, may grasp little of the significance or symbolism in this conspicuous 'ball' or 'pearl,' but we may approach an understanding of it through Dr. De Groot's investigation of Chinese religion.' He describes the ceremonial dress of the Wuist priests as having a "broad border of blue silk around the neck stitched with two ascending dragons which are belching out a ball probably representing thunder."

De Groot explains further that "the ball between two dragons is often delineated as a spiral," and adds that "in an ancient charm... a spiral denotes the rolling of thunder from which issues a flash of lightning."

In Japanese prints a dragon is frequently accompanied by a huge spiral indicating a thunderstorm caused by him. Are the antler-shaped appendages rising above the 'ball' intended to represent lightning-flames?

Dr. Visser discusses this hypothesis at length, pointing out that the whole attitude of the two dragons in such art-productions displays great eagerness to catch and swallow the gleaming sphere. This attitude and avidity become clear, Visser thinks, when one sees a Chinese picture like that in Blacker's *Chats on Oriental China*, of two dragons rushing at a fiery spiral ball above the legend: "Two Dragons Facing the Moon."

Sometimes two dragons confront each other, each having a flaming pearl floating just in front of their faces.

There is nothing absurd about this suggestion of swallowing the moon. Celestial dragons are, in reality, personifications of clouds; and among the most primitive and widespread impressions respecting lunar eclipses is the notion that a monster is devouring the moon.

Dark and writhing clouds advancing as if alive, and finally extinguishing its light, might easily suggest a similar thought; and it was a matter of early experience that after these hungry cloud-dragons had completed their feast, fertilizing rain usually blessed the thirsty fields and pastures, so that the dragons got the credit.

Hence artists liked to represent these public benefactors playfully contending for the opportunity to devour the 'queen of night' and so produce a crop-saving fall of showers for which they (the dragons) would enjoy grateful appreciation. Incidentally, artists note that a pair of their graceful figures make a well-balanced composition. The moon and water are closely connected in all mythologies; hence the moon is closely linked with fertilizing agencies in general.

Faith in the moon's influence on the weather lingers strongly in the mind of rural communities even in these progressive United States of America; and it is easy to believe that the dragon-thanking agriculturists and shepherds of China felt assured that the rain-giving will and power of their celestial friends were refreshed by frequently absorbing this bright and stimulating object in the sky.

That these reflections are not 'all moonshine' is shown by evidence in the writings of the old philosophers of the East, who assure us that the actual mundane pearl taken from the oyster in whose shell it is formed beneath the salt waters is the "concrete essence of the moon" distilled through the system of the mollusk--an emanation from the moon-goddess herself. "The pearls found in the oyster," as one student interprets it, "were supposed to be little moons, drops of the moon-substance (or dew) which fell from the sky into the gaping oyster.

Hence pearls acquired the reputation of shining by night, like to the moon from which they were believed to have come." All this tends to demonstrate that the theory that the moon is the mani, the 'pearl of great price,' the divine essence of the gods, is not unreasonable; and its probability is reinforced by the stated fact that in both Chinese and Japanese dictionaries an ideograph combined of elements meaning respectively 'jewel' and 'moon' is defined as 'moon-pearl.'

I am inclined to regard this as a better explanation of the puzzling object so constantly associated with dragons in Chinese decorative art than is the 'thunder' hypothesis.

At the same time it is to be noted that the spiral character of the 'pearl,' and of the 'tag' that springs from its centre, is the widely recognized symbol for thunder; while the antler-like appendages indicate accompanying lightnings; therefore the identification of the 'pearl' with the moon need not preclude its co-association with thunderstorms, for the dragon is a rain-controller, and in a fair sense is the deity heard and seen in thunder and lightning, who is in particular the storm-god of sailormen.

In Japan, whose dragon-mythology has been strongly tinctured with Indian notions, as we have seen, the pearl appears mainly in connection with mythical tales of the ocean--a very natural connection. In the Nihongi, an ancient Japanese historical work, it is related

that in the second year of the Emperor Chaui's reign (A.D. 193) the Empress Jingo-Kogo found in the sea "a jewel which grants all desires," apparently the same lost by the frightened Naga Maidens.

She also obtained from the submarine palace of the dragon-king the ebb-jewel (kan-ja) and the flood-jewel (man-ja), by which she was able, on at least one important occasion, to control the tides; they are described in the Nihongi as about five sun long, the former white and the latter blue--the color of the east, whence rain comes; and the moon is controller of the oceanic tides!

Japanese legends relating to this matter, as briefly given by Joly, in his elaborate work on the legendary art of Japan, are connected with the mythical character Riujin, the ruler of the waters of the globe, whose home is beneath the sea, or in deep lakes, and who is represented as a very old man bearing a coiled dragon on his head or back. Riujin carries the divine jewel tama, esteemed as a symbol of purity and usually shown in Japan on the forehead of the dragon; also the jewels of the flowing and the retreating tides, which he gave to Jingo-Kogo, Hikohodermi, and others.

In representations of Hendaka Sonja, one of the worshipful sixteen arhats, special disciples of Buddha, "he is generally shown," Joly tells us, "with a bowl from which issues a dragon or a rain-cloud. He holds the bowl aloft with his left hand and with his right carries the sacred gem. Sometimes he is shown seated on a rock, the dragon occasionally aside, and crouching to reach the tama."

Another legend relates that Riujin once captured from the Chinese queen, the daughter of Kamatari, a most precious jewel, which later was recovered from Riujin by a fisher-girl, wife of Kamatari, who went to the dragon's submarine palace and got possession of the gem. She immediately stabbed her breast and hid the jewel in the wound, then floated to the surface and was found by Kamatari, the jewel guiding him to her by the dazzling light it shed from the concealing wound that became fatal to the heroine. Such stories are logical if the 'jewel' (tama, pearl) is identified with the moon.

Now it may well be asked: how is it that, granting the fondness of dragons for gems and the identity of the several gems and jewels mentioned in myths and ceremonies, they all trace back in significance to the pearl? Well, the pearl is an excellent image in miniature of the full moon; it, like the moon, represents water, and is a part of the history of the sea and sea-wanderings.

Hence pearls were regarded as in the special possession of the sea-gods and water-spirits; and these beings were often pictured in forms far more fishy, or crocodilian, or shark-like, than were the terrestrial, serpentine dragons. But Japanese mythology includes also an earthquake-fish (Namazu) like an eel, with a long, attenuated head and long feelers on both sides of the mouth, which stirs about underground, thus causing earthquakes.

"The cultural drift from West to East, along the south coast of India," Dr. Smith reminds us, "was effected mainly by sailors who were searching for pearls. Sharks constituted the special dangers the divers had to incur in exploiting pearl beds to obtain the precious 'giver of life.' But at the time these great enterprises were undertaken in the Indian Ocean the people dwelling in the neighbourhood of the chief pearlbeds regarded the sea as the great source of all life-giving, and the god who exercised these powers was

incarnated in a fish (ancestor of Dagon).:

"The sharks therefore had to be brought into this scheme, and they were rationalized as the guardians of the storehouse of life-giving pearls at the bottom of the sea... Out of these crude materials the imaginations of the early pearl-fishers created the picture of wonderful submarine palaces of Naga kings in which vast wealth, not merely of pearls but also of gold, precious stones, and beautiful maidens, were placed under the protection of shark-dragons."